
Exploiting storytelling in a young learners' classroom

Sylvia Stachurska
Jan Długosz University

Abstract

The article presents the results of action research on the effective usage of storytelling in the very young learners' classroom. As a young teacher who works with several groups of very young learners, the author faced many problems concerning efficient application of storytelling. The difficulties she had to confront led her to exploit further advantages of the storytelling technique as one that particularly engages students. The results of the study indicate that children become more involved during story sessions on condition that a variety of pre- and post-story activities is employed. Additionally, diversity of activities is an important prerequisite to organization and student's discipline. The author directs the readers' attention to the fact that, in order to be a professional storyteller, the teacher has to experiment with different methods, techniques, and styles of telling stories.

Key words: young learners, storytelling, action research

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in introducing foreign language instruction to children at a very young age. Even some kindergartens incorporate foreign language learning into their curricula. This trend calls for an analysis of various activities such as songs, chants, rhymes and

games. Among many tasks, storytelling is the one that attracts and engages mostly very young learners. Stories are regarded as valuable resources since they develop two key language skills: listening and speaking in their natural order.

Undoubtedly, there are many benefits of the storytelling technique in the foreign language classroom. The most crucial reason for telling stories is that they broaden children's imagination. Not only do they provoke shared experience, advance listening and speaking skills, but also speed up the process of acquiring new vocabulary. Another issue that has to be pointed out is that they amuse and motivate. Additionally, storytelling ensures a continuation of children's learning development, as it can be a helpful tool while explaining problematic issues and making them more comprehensible, by picking up an innovative point of view and considering the issue from a different perspective (Davies, 2005).

There are many types of stories (see e.g. Ellis and Brewster, 1991 for a theoretical description of types of stories). For the purpose of this article only selected types will be presented in detail. According to Ellis and Brewster (1991), stories can be classified into content stories and narratives. The first category includes traditional stories, fairy tales, fantasy stories and stories about animals; the second group comprises rhyming stories, cumulative stories and humorous stories.

No matter what type of story the teacher chooses, he or she should keep in mind that children like short dialogues, colourful pictures and, above all, a stimulating and lively plot that leads to a happy or at least satisfying ending. When the teacher selects the type of story that suits the group best, she should then prepare appropriate activities.

There is a variety of activities that support children's understanding of stories. There are two types of pre-story activities: ones that support the content, and those which help with the concept. Moreover, there are a great number of publishers that suggest a range of follow-up activities. These make children's work more meaningful and provide them with additional encouragement.

After preparing activities to pre-teach vocabulary and some follow-up exercises, the teacher should decide on a suitable approach to telling the

story. One possibility is an oral approach; within it, two techniques can be distinguished: storytelling and story reading (Greene, 1996). In order to become a professional storyteller, the teacher must exploit the opportunities oral language creates, and make up for its defects (Lipman, 1999). Craig et al. (2001) state that “culturally and linguistically diverse classroom requires that teachers understand that there are many different ways of telling a good story besides the traditional, time-sequenced, school story format. Having opportunities to explore all narrative forms, while learning the rules associated with each, allows children with different story telling histories to support one another’s path to literacy” (Craig et al., 2001: 46). On the other hand, Wright (1992) explains that some people have a talent for telling stories. The point is that everyone can improve their storytelling and story reading skills.

Aims of the study

The study focused on the effectiveness of storytelling and reading aloud for the teacher’s professional development. The primary objective of the investigation was to find out whether having practiced storytelling, the teacher increases his or her confidence in reading aloud and storytelling abilities. In the preliminary investigation, the spectrum related to the problem was examined on the basis of a reflective tool, namely, diary. It was presumed that storytelling, as opposed to reading aloud, does not only facilitate their listeners’ language development, but also teachers’ teaching progress. Another issue was that in order to work with the storytelling technique effectively, the teacher must be aware of its values. Finally, it was assumed that the quality of telling a story will increase provided that it is preceded by a variety of activities.

Method

As professionals, most teachers would claim that a process of teaching should undergo constant development. One of the strategies which serves that purpose with special emphasis on language teaching is action research, teachers’ reflection on their teaching. It is organized and systematic collection of data that deals with everyday teaching practice. All the details,

information and materials are later analyzed in order to draw conclusions about further training (Wallace, 1998).

Action research entails smaller investigations done in the teacher's classroom context and constitutes a number of loop stages. Wallace (1998) suggested a model, presented in Figure 1 below, for professional development that involves the process called a 'reflective cycle'. Gathering and analyzing the data connected with a teacher's professional practice is involved in the whole action process. It relies on reflecting on what the teacher has found out and applying it to his or her professional action.

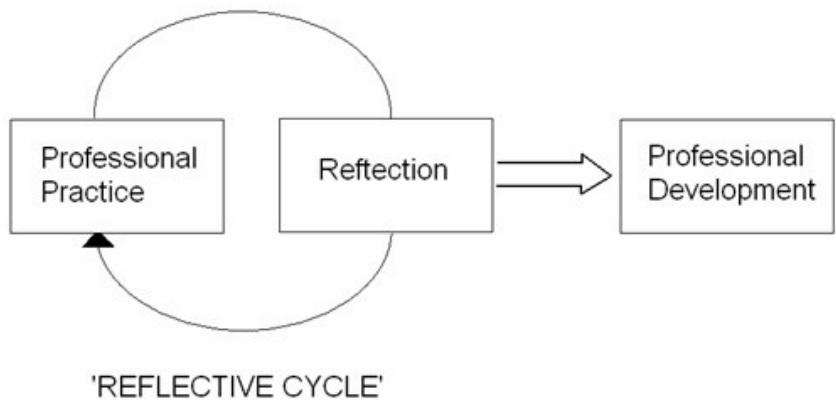


Figure 1.
The reflective cycle and professional development (Wallace, 1998: 13).

Instruments

One of the key issues after deciding on a particular type of research is to choose the mode of research. There is a wide range of various tools that may be used in action research. Wallace (1998) listed the following types: field-notes, logs, journals, diaries, personal accounts, interviews, questionnaires and case studies. Choosing action research tools depends on the study that the researcher is going to conduct.

The author of this investigation used diary as one of the reflective tools. After each story session, the teacher described their feelings before and after the story, and how the lesson had gone. Moreover, the teacher prepa-

red lesson plans for each of the ten classes. After each story session, those lesson plans were analysed with special attention paid to each of the techniques. Additionally, a self-assessment sheet was prepared and filled by the teacher. It contained twenty yes/no questions (see appendix 1).

Preliminary investigation

The investigation took place in a class of ten six-year-old learners attending a private course of English from October 2009 to June 2010. The students had already had two years of English instruction in pre-school. That was a typical mixed ability class. Among all learners there was also one autistic boy.

The ten participants attended the course, which lasted ten months, during which the teacher regularly told or read aloud different stories. Each story was presented once a month. All the stories were adjusted to the level of the participants. Five of them were told to children and the other half was read aloud. The teacher kept a diary during the preliminary investigation. After each session with a story she took notes on the lesson and her feelings before and after the story. For each of the ten lessons she prepared lesson plans (see a sample in Appendix 2) that were later analysed.

The first story presented was about a loveable fawn called Bambi and his family (see a lesson plan in Appendix 2). The story was presented through a poster and with the use of paper puppets. After warm-up activities and a presentation of the vocabulary children were asked to listen to the story. The tale was recorded on the CD. While listening to the story children were asked to memorize which members of the family appear in the story. Children listened to the story twice. During the second listening, they were encouraged to participate in the repetition of colours and a chant.

While conducting that lesson, the teacher noticed that children lost their concentration in the middle of the lesson. Although they were quite focused in the first part of the lesson, namely the introduction, they lost their interest when they were asked to listen to the story. Additionally, it was difficult for the teacher to move all three puppets with two hands. The recording was a bit too fast, and it was hard to pause the story at the same

time holding the puppets. The teacher had a feeling that children detected her internal nervousness, which was the consequence of losing control over the story.

Therefore, the next lesson was based on a story that was told aloud. It was a short tale about Gepetto, a woodcarver who made a wooden boy named Pinocchio (Musiol & Villarroel, 2005). The story was told with the help of a marionette and real objects presenting toys. The diary showed that the lesson was not fully successful since the teacher was not totally comfortable with telling the story. It was quite embarrassing for the teacher to change voices for different characters, namely, a more serious and deeper voice for the father, and a boyish one for Pinocchio.

The results of the investigation pinpointed that out of the five classes during which stories were told, the students were engaged in only two of them. However, it was noted that the lesson during which the story was read to children and the teacher used a variety of pre- and post-story activities was also successful. Surprisingly, reading aloud transpired to be the most successful, since three out of five lessons were of decent quality.

Research questions

After the preliminary investigation and collecting the data, it could conceivably be hypothesized that a variety of factors have influence on children's participation in the classes. Moreover, after the analysis of the teacher's diary, it occurred that the teacher did not feel confident while telling the stories. An examination of a self-assessment sheet also detected that she lacked skills in using both storytelling techniques. Therefore, two research questions could be listed: 1) What is the influence of different types of activities on children's involvement during the lesson? and 2) What is the teacher's awareness of different storytelling techniques? In order to answer these questions, the author decided to follow a research procedure described further in this paper.

Intervention

A class of twelve six-year-old learners attending a private kindergarten was under investigation. The whole process took six months and finished

in February 2011. The children had already had two years of English instruction in another pre-school. The twelve participants attended English classes twice a week during which they were regularly told or read aloud different stories. There were six stories presented during the whole study. A story was told once a month. All the tales were adjusted to the level of the participants. Three of them were told to children, and the rest were read aloud. Since the preliminary investigation had revealed that the teacher's storytelling skills were insufficient, this time the lessons were improved by adding different techniques of presenting stories.

Therefore, while presenting a paper hand book titled "Who's there?" (Powell 1997) the teacher tried to use a variety of activities such as: listen and repeat, disappearing cards, rolling the dice and saying the words, as well as miming.

The next stage of the lesson was an introduction of the story, a presentation of the scene and characters. The students had been given a task before the teacher started to tell the story. Children got small pictures of animals that appear in the tale. They had to order the animals as they appeared in the story. After telling the story, the sequence was checked with children on the board and the story was told for the second time. This time the teacher encouraged children to participate and used various techniques such as repetition of names of animals or naming the characters. The story was read slowly and clearly so that the children had time to think. The teacher pointed to the illustration and varied the rhythm and speed as well as used gestures and mimed the animals that appeared in the story.

After presenting the story there was a group activity. The teacher divided the class into two groups and stuck flashcards around the classroom. The activity was explained and performed with two chosen students in order to check if the students understood the rules. Then the teacher uttered the name of an animal, and first two students had to find and touch the flashcard. The first student who did it scored one point. As a reward, all the students got a colourful animal stamp. At the end of the lesson every child got a mini book of the story they were told.

As it was mentioned in the preliminary examination, the teacher faced some problems while conducting a lesson during which children were

listening to the story. With an aim of solving the problems and improving that type of a lesson, the teacher decided to run three more classes of that type.

The children listened to the story about Goofy and his friends: Donald Duck, Daisy, Minnie and Mickey Mouse, who came to his birthday party and brought some presents for him (Musiol & Villarroel, 2005). These were clothes items like a T-shirt, trousers, shoes, and a hat. As an element of an introduction to the lesson and the story, the teacher showed a poster of Goofy and his friends, and asked several questions concerning the picture, namely: What can you see?, Who lives in the house? and *Who is in the scene?* Then, the new vocabulary was presented and drilled. Not only did silent and loud repetition take place, but also total physical response activities like listen and touch and listen and point. Children also did a ring game. The next stage of the lesson was to listen to the story that was recorded on the CD. The students were given a task before listening; namely, they had to remember which clothes appeared in the story. While the students were listening to the story, the teacher was miming all the actions with a plush puppet of Goofy. After they heard the whole story, the children were asked about the items of clothes. During the second listening, the teacher paused the recording and asked questions concerning characters, and things that happened next.

As a final part of the lesson the children did two follow-up activities. In one of the activities children had to dress up Mickey and Minnie in paper clothes. The second one was an individual work with a poster worksheet.

Results

After six months of examining the problems that occurred in the preliminary investigation, the following results may be presented. Firstly, it occurred that children were more interested in the story sessions during which the tales were told by the teacher. The results of the investigation showed that out of three classes during which the story was told to children they were engaged in each of them. However, it was noted that when the story was read to children, two out of three classes were successful, too.

Surprisingly, it occurred that a variety of pre- and post-story activities did not only influence the quality of lessons but also improved children's

participation. The students' attention span increased. A possible explanation for this might be that the teacher used a variety of activities, such as preparation ones that support content and concept. Among these activities the following may be distinguished: flashcard activities, ring games, total physical response activities, games to activate the senses as well as card games. From these activities the subsequent may be marked out: matching words to pictures, guessing, giving instructions, sequencing, classifying, dominos, and memory games. The results confirmed that a variety of activities positively influences children's participation in the lesson.

Furthermore, after first three months of investigation, the teacher's confidence and ability to tell stories increased, which resulted in fluency, clear voice, and pace, as can be concluded from the diary entries. Moreover, the teacher's knowledge of the technique expanded as they explored the subject of storytelling in greater depth. This confirmed that the effectiveness of storytelling increases when the teacher is more aware of its values.

Additionally, ring games such as using an English mat so as to identify, associate, and classify newly acquired vocabulary did not only facilitate the language but also advanced gross motor skills. Children are lively and need lots of activities that involve movement of arms and legs. Roberts & Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education (1989) maintained that children require a variety of activities that help them release their energy. Therefore, exercises involving an English mat serve children best as they employ running and jumping which also influence the sense of balance, not to mention TPR activities that progress corporal expression, rhythm, spatial abilities, and listening comprehension skills.

Incidentally, the investigation revealed that reading a story aloud and timing it before presenting to children advanced the organization of a whole lesson. Each story should have its own pace. Thus, as Greene (1996) stated, "good timing makes the difference between the neophyte and the accomplished storyteller" (Greene, 1996: 68).

Discussion

Many studies which have dealt with the technique of telling and reading stories have found that visual aids help students to understand the meaning

as well as the context (Zaro and Saraberri, 1995). For instance, flashcards, pictures, drawings on the blackboard, cut-out figures, masks, puppets, real objects provide children with visual support (Ellis and Brewster, 1992). In a detailed study of a group of children aged 5 and 6, Flatley and Rutland (1986) found that picture books support emergent literacy skills as well as offer a variety of topics.

Hu and Commeyras (2008) also support the idea that pictures increase comprehension of the story. The study of a 5-year-old Chinese girl within a 10-week tutoring context, where the primary materials were wordless picture books, depicted that these books combined with extended literacy activities facilitated the child's learning in both languages. The findings would be more convincing if the researchers had used a variety of activities, not only the ones connected with pictures. Therefore, the author's investigation in which she used different kinds of activities to introduce and practice new vocabulary indicated that a variety fosters children's participation and involvement during the lesson.

The results of the research support the notion that opportunities to practise new vocabulary in a variety of ways during storytelling have a positive effect on children's engagement as well as on the acquisition of new words. The results herein support, in part, the results from Senechal et al. (1995) about effective means of vocabulary acquisition. The aim of the two experiments conducted was to find out how children at different vocabulary knowledge levels acquire new words from listening to stories that were read aloud. At the beginning of those two experiments all the participants at the age of four underwent a vocabulary test. Consequently, they were classified into two groups, namely with a high and low level of vocabulary knowledge. During the first experiment the teacher read a book to both groups. In the case of one story, the children listened passively; however, while listening to the second story, they were given a task that incorporated labeling pictures with new vocabulary items. The results of this study indicated that children who were previously characterized as being more vocabulary literate produced more inventive words as opposed to those who possessed lower level of vocabulary skills. Additionally, it occurred that children who listened to the story passively also produced a lower

number of words contrary to those who answered some questions during the story session.

The second experiment was conducted on the same two groups of children. That time children had to point and label pictures during a story reading. Again, it occurred that children with a higher level of vocabulary comprehended more new words. Moreover, those children who actively took part in the story session by pointing or labeling the pictures learned new words quickly. Senechal et al. (1995) explained that a possible reason for that might be the fact that verbal and non-verbal responding improves the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition.

Additionally, it is important for the teacher to devote each day some time to practicing the story before presenting it in front of the class. For this reason, reading a story several times so as to remember its characters better is advisable. It is also wise to practise the story by reading it aloud to oneself or family. Hesitations may uncover weak areas and voice imperfections. It was also noted that reading a story from a book, slowly and loudly, before going to sleep influences better memorization. Greene (1996) presented a good example of saving time in order to learn a story. She wrote about Marie Shedlock who recommended her students to memorize no more than seven stories a year. She herself admitted that she learned only three tales a year. Shedlock explained that it is not a gross misconduct to tell the story more than once as children love listening to stories over and over again. What is more, practising a tale in front of a mirror helps to get rid of distracting mannerisms and makes gestures more natural.

Conclusion

All teachers have some strengths connected with telling stories. However, it does not mean that they do not need to develop further. It is essential to evolve professionally on a continuous basis. Thus, the first and most important issue concerning storytelling is employing a variety of activities in every lesson. Different activities help children to be more interested and concentrated. As has been mentioned, a range of exercises helps children to acquire new vocabulary quicker. It is worth noticing that the teacher

should not forget about being flexible. Disruptions will occur naturally. It is the teacher's role to adapt activities to children's present needs.

Furthermore, to be a professional storyteller the teacher has to experiment with different methods, techniques and styles of telling stories. There is no golden mean that ensures full success to the lesson. The tale will never become yours if you do not tell it to more than two audiences. In fact, students may react to a story differently depending on their mood. "By telling the story to different groups you discover more about the story and you learn how to pace it" (Green, 1996: 94). Accomplished storytellers have an opportunity to tell the story more than once to many different audiences.

Finally, "the storyteller is not an actor but the medium through which the story is passed" (Green, 1996: 69). Therefore, the teller should throw light on a tale and articulate the ideas, moods and feelings, but never identify with the characters.

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Appendix 1

SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET	YES/NO
1. Were the children engaged?	
2. Did they understand enough to enjoy it?	
3. Did they all hear the story?	
4. Did I put all my energy into it?	
5. Did I use enough variety while introducing new vocabulary?	
6. Did I use my body language and gestures enough?	
7. Did I involve them enough?	
8. Did I ask appropriate questions to encourage pupils?	
9. Am I satisfied?	
10. Do I need to improve something?	
11. Did I use clarifying questions?	
12. Did I pay attention to the feelings of the students?	
13. Did I vary the volume and tone of my voice?	

14. Did I rephrase and ask multiple questions to help others to understand the context?	
15. Did I maintain an eye contact?	
16. Did I invite my listeners to add details and comments?	
17. Did I use enough variety in follow-up activities?	
18. Did I tell a story with a specific purpose in mind?	
19. Did I create an enjoyable atmosphere?	
20. Did I notice any weaknesses of my lesson?	

Appendix 2

KONSPEKT LEKCJI		
IMIĘ I NAZWISKO: Sylwia Stachurska	GRUPA: 6– latki	DATA: 10.10.2009
TEMAT: Bajka o Babim — wprowadzenie nazw członków rodziny.		
CELE GŁÓWNE: Uczeń: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opowiada o członkach rodziny. 		
CELE OPERACYJNE: Uczeń: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nazywa członków rodziny przedstawionych na kartach obrazkowych • słucha piosenki i wskazuje członków rodziny na obrazku w książce • śpiewa piosenkę o rodzinie • przedstawia członków rodziny używając zwrotu <i>My...</i> 		
ZAŁOŻENIA: Uczeń: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rozumie większość słownictwa, którym posługuje się nauczyciel • jest w stanie szybko i sprawnie wykonać ćwiczenia • chętnie współpracuje z nauczycielem 		

EWENTUALNE PROBLEMY I ICH ROZWIĄZANIA:

Uczeń:

- ma problem z poprawną wymową niektórych słówek
- ma problem ze zrozumieniem instrukcji wydawanych przez nauczyciela

Rozwiązania problemów:

- nauczyciel wymawia nowe słówka i prosi uczniów o ich powtórzenie
- nauczyciel powtarza polecenia, pokazuje zasady, sam wykonując ćwiczenie lub w razie potrzeby używa języka polskiego

CZAS	ETAPY	PRZEBIEG LEKCJI	MATERIAŁY	FORMY PRACY
2'	ROZGRZEWKA	Nauczyciel wita się z uczniami. Wykonuje z uczniami piosenkę rozpoczynającą lekcję.	CD z piosenkami	Nauczyciel- Uczniowie
3'	WPROWADZENIE	1.Nauczyciel pokazuje uczniom kopertę z tajemniczym słowem zaznaczając, że pod koniec lekcji będą musiały zgadnąć je. 2. Nauczyciel pokazuje uczniom plakat przedstawiający las. Następnie pyta dzieci: <i>Co widzicie?</i> , <i>Kto może mieszkać w takim lesie?</i> itp. oraz pyta uczniów czy domyślają się o czym będzie lekcja.	Koperta z tajemniczym słówkiem plakat	Nauczyciel- Uczniowie Uczniowie- Nauczyciel

10'	PREZENTACJA JĘZYKOWA	<p>1. Nauczyciel kolejno nazywa członków rodziny zaprezentowanych na kartach obrazkowych. Uczniowie po nim powtarzają słówka. Następnie umieszcza karty na tablicy.</p> <p>Uczniowie wspólnie z nauczycielem powtarzają słownictwo.</p> <p>2. Nauczyciel każe uczniom zamknąć oczy, odwraca jeden obrazek.</p> <p>Uczniowie zgadują którego obrazka brakuje. Następnie pokazuje uczniom obrazek i pyta: <i>Is this a mum?</i></p> <p>Jeśli obrazek przedstawia mamę, uczniowie muszą wstać, jeśli nie, siedzą na swoim miejscu.</p> <p>3. Nauczyciel rozdaje karty z rodziną uczniom, następnie pyta uczniów: <i>Who's got mum?</i> Uczniowie odpowiadają: <i>Kasia!</i> itd.</p> <p>4. Nauczyciel prezentuje pacynkę Bambiego, jego mamy i taty, pyta ucznia: <i>Who's this?</i>, oraz czy uczniowie znają tego bohatera, opowiada uczniom, że to on mieszka w tym lesie ze swoją rodziną.</p> <p>Pokazuje kolejno mamę i tatę mówiąc <i>This is his...</i> Uczniowie dokończają zdanie.</p>	Karty obrazkowe Papierowe pacynki	Nauczyciel- Uczniowie Uczniowie- Nauczyciel Nauczyciel- Uczeń
7'	Opowiadanie bajki	<p>1. Nauczyciel wyjaśnia uczniom, iż za chwilę posłuchają bajki o rodzinie sarenki. Zadaniem uczniów jest zapamiętanie ilu członków rodziny pojawia się w bajce.</p> <p>2. Nauczyciel pyta uczniów kto pojawił się w bajce.</p> <p>3. Prowadzący ponownie włącza nagranie i zachęca uczniów w trakcie do nazywania członków rodziny, kolorów itp.</p>	Bajka na CD	Praca indywidualna Uczniowie- Nauczyciel

6'	Ćwiczenia po bajce	<p>1. Nauczyciel rozdaje uczniom ćwiczenie, wyjaśnia polecenie. Uczniowie muszą oddzielić dwie rodziny: rodzinę kur i psów poprzez przyklejenie naklejki w odpowiednim kolorze dla danej rodziny przy każdym członku rodziny.</p> <p>2. Nauczyciel prosi uczniów by stanęli w kole, następnie rozdaje poszczególnym uczniom po jednej karcie obrazkowej z członkiem rodziny. Uczniowie poruszają się wg wskazówek zegara w rytm piosenki przekazując sobie karty z ręki do ręki, nie pokazując ich innym. Gdy muzyka przestaje grać, dzieci pokazują sobie obrazki i nazywają członków rodziny</p>	CD z piosenkami Ćwiczenie nr 1	Praca indywidualna Uczeń- Nauczyciel Uczniowie- Nauczyciel
2'	ZAKOŃCZENIE LEKCJI	<p>Nauczyciel żegna się z uczniami. Dzieci śpiewają piosenkę na pożegnanie.</p>	CD z piosenkami	Nauczyciel- Uczniowie

Sylwia Stachurska jest absolwentką filologii angielskiej Uniwersytetu Opolskiego. Od 5 lat zajmuje się nauczaniem języka angielskiego. Jej doświadczenie obejmuje pracę zarówno w szkołach państwowych i prywatnych, poczynając od nauczania przedszkolnego aż po grupy uniwersyteckie. Obecnie pracuje na stanowisku lektora języka angielskiego na Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie. W 2012 rozpoczęła studia doktoranckie na Wydziale Filologicznym na Uniwersytecie Opolskim. Jej głównymi zainteresowaniami badawczymi są metodyka nauczania języka angielskiego, nauczanie języka obcego wspomagane komputerowo oraz użycie dramy w nauczaniu wczesnoszkolnym.